Chapter 9
Beast

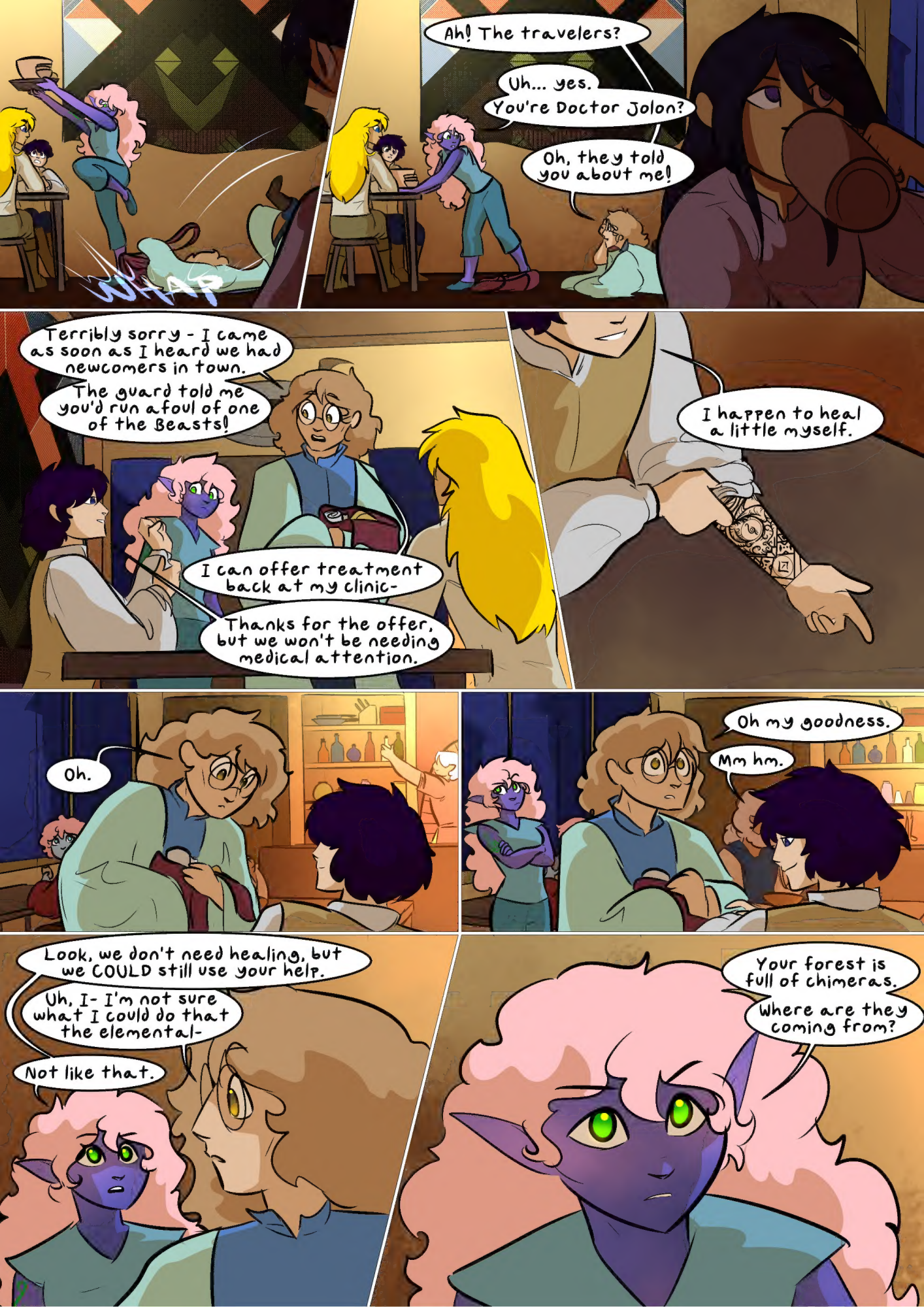
let him get away!
And who KNOWS where he might be hiding?!
We can ask around town.
I mean, it's not like we can do more tonight.
I could go after him.
Wh- no! Kendal, that's clearly not going to work!
We'll coordinate and go after him together in the morning.
Assuming he doesn't vanish into the night with all my things.
Who goes there?!
Oh for crying out loud.
Hello, noble guardsman. I have an emissary sigil.
Leave me alone.
O-oh! Uh, sorry! Welcome to Hilltop!
I'm not in the mood.
I'm really sorry about him. He just got robbed and he's very cranky about it.
I'm NOT "cranky"!
Look, this is why putting ALL your stuff in one bag is a bad idea.
Especially if it's bigger on the inside.
I CAN'T CARRY IT OTHERWISE!

KRRT
Okay.
Now for the real thing.

You two sit tight.
I'll get some food and ask the innkeeper if she knows anything about the thief.
ugh
You can pay me back when we find your stuff.
uuuugh
Kendal?
Hm?
I saw you jump a full forty feet in the air this afternoon.
And I can't help but notice that your arm has completely healed since the fight.
What ARE you?
...That's a little complicated.
Clearly.
I don't know if you'd believe me if I-
N-no, look. You don't need to convince me.
I know it can't be a simple answer, because I haven't been able to figure it out myself.
And it's my fault I keep getting distracted with my own... problems.
Every time I think I've got you figured out, you prove me wrong again.
So please just... lay it out for me so I can stop making a fool out of myself.

A "ferin", you said?
Uh, yeah.
Sorry, dear, I'm not familiar.
Really?!
He was like a... a person mixed with a big cat?
Claws and stuff?
Tail?
Oh!
Sounds like you had a run-in with one of The Beasts!
"The Beasts"?
Mmm hm.
Nasty things. All mixed up.
They've been harrying the woods for sindahlans now.
Don't tend to bother us here in Hilltop, though.
I'm surprised you made it through unharmed!
Not many travelers come through here these days, and those that do nearly always arrive torn up and bloody.
It's a rare case that doesn't need to visit Doctor Jolon before they're well enough to leave.
A doctor?
Do you think HE might know something about this "beast"?
Oh, I'd imagine so!
Jolon's an Asera boy - a real mage, and with academy training!
A town as small as ours is lucky to have a proper healer around.
You should drop by his clinic, I'm sure he'd be happy to help you out.
Good idea.
...Wow.
Yeah.

So you're not even SLIGHTLY human.
...I guess not.
Well, that certainly explains some things.
It's only natural you'd retain Vash's prodigious strength and speed.
And it's no wonder you're a bit... disconnected from typical social norms.
And I wonder...
This might be why you were unaffected by the Dragon.
This is a fascinating opportunity for exploration.
How much have you tested the extent of your abilities?
Not much.
I've only had nine days.
Nine-?!
I'm back!
The bad news is it's bread and stew.
The good news is I know who can tell us about the thief!
WAS ANYONE INJURED?!


WHAT
Ah! The travelers?
Uh... yes. You're Doctor Jolon?
Oh, they told you about me!
Terribly sorry - I came as soon as I heard we had newcomers in town.
The guard told me you'd run afoul of one of the Beasts!
I can offer treatment back at my clinic-
Thanks for the offer, but we won't be needing medical attention.
I happen to heal a little myself.
Oh.
Oh my goodness.
Mm hm.
Look, we don't need healing, but we COULD still use your help.
Uh, I- I'm not sure what I could do that the elemental-
Not like that.
Your forest is full of chimeras.
Where are they coming from?

Uh, ALSO your forest has a wild ferin who stole all my things.
And we REALLY want to know where he is.
Oh dear.
Which is a LITTLE higher priority than the chimera thing.
So could you tell us where he's hiding out, please?
Yes... maybe you COULD fix this...

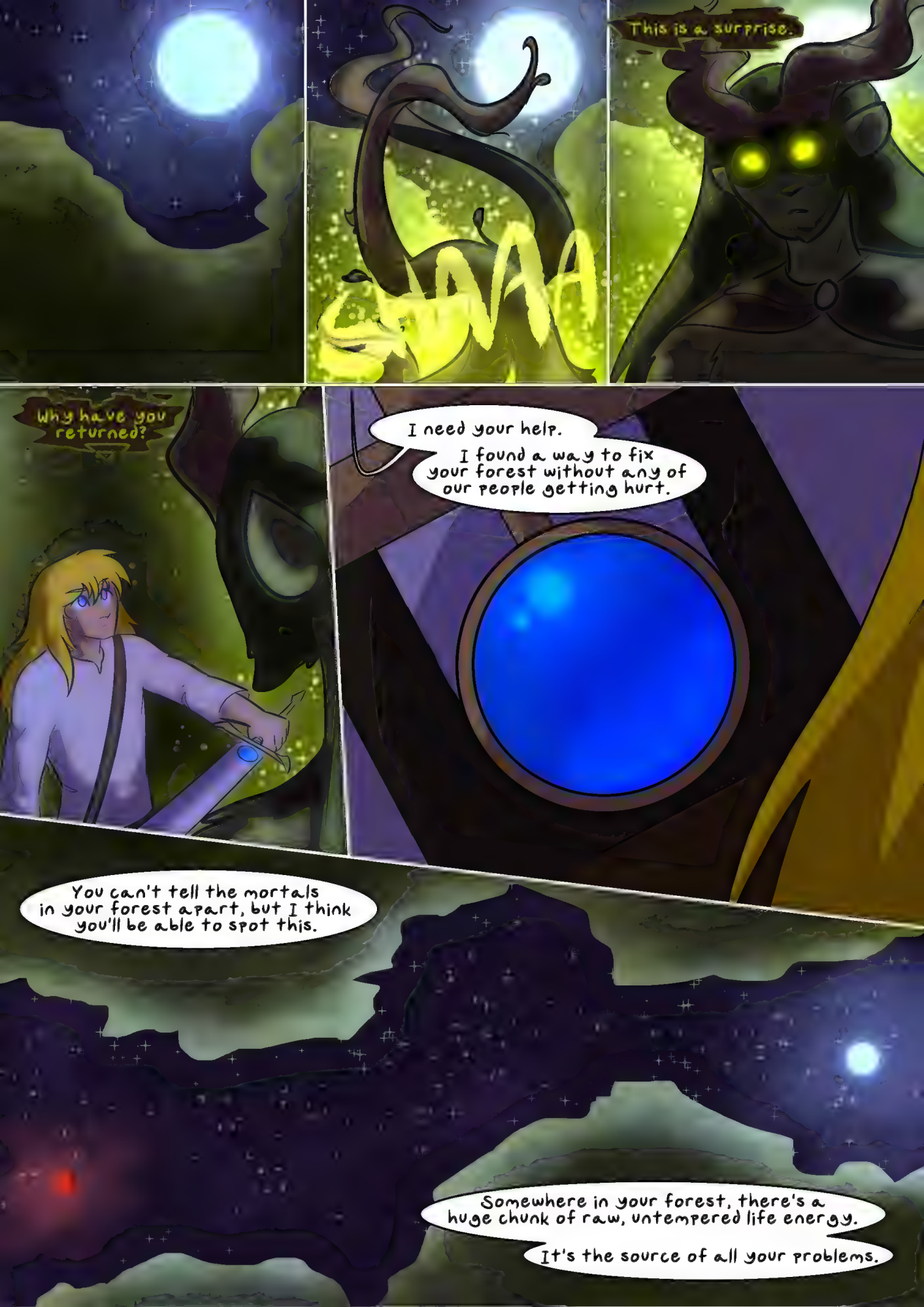

The good news is, I can answer both your questions at once.
Unfortunately, that's the ONLY good news.
I don't wish to alarm the townspeople.
Could we continue this discussion back at my clinic?

There we go.
Sorry about the mess.
I don't typically host guests like this.
Fill us in and we'll call it even.
Erin!
No, no. It's quite all right.
You said you could answer both questions at once.
Ah - yes.
The Ferin, and the source of the chimeras -
I believe they're the same person.
That's impossible.
Wh- Kendal?
No. He's right.
Ferin are magically inert. They can't be mages.
Er - yes. You're both correct.
But anyone can use a magic item's stored power, even a ferin.
And unfortunately, this one broke into my clinic and stole an uninscribed life lacrima from me.
Quite a large one, in fact. I use it for operations that require more power than I can personally safely channel.
I didn't realize his purpose until the chimeras began attacking.
...This is why I didn't want to alarm the townspeople.
I'm afraid this is all my fault.

...Blast.
If he's scrounging power, no wonder he stole my bag.
There's a lot in there he could misuse.
Oh dear.
Until now he's refrained from attacking the town directly, but this could embolden him.
Why?
Excuse me?
Why would he do that?
The townspeople don't even know him. It can't be a personal vendetta.
And he's not a mage. Even with the lacrima, he shouldn't be able to control the chimeras directly.
Unleashing them is just directionless violence.
Well, I - I can only guess at his motivation, but I can assume -
Kendal, wild ferin are usually outcast from society.
His vendetta doesn't need to be personal. A predator-type like him has probably been run out of a dozen towns just like this one.
I'm afraid this is true.
While ferin are simply the unfortunate victims of a hereditary curse, many erroneously assume them to be mutants or monsters.
The ones alone in the wild were most commonly driven from their homes, or in some cases chose to abandon humanity.
I'm sure that's why he's avoided the town, striking only from a distance.
A place like this must have painful associations for the young man. I can hardly blame him for his anger.
It is a cruel, unfair existence.
That's no excuse for what he's done.
What he did to that creature was worse than killing it.
It was so twisted up, it lost everything that made it what it was.
He's not doing that to anything else.

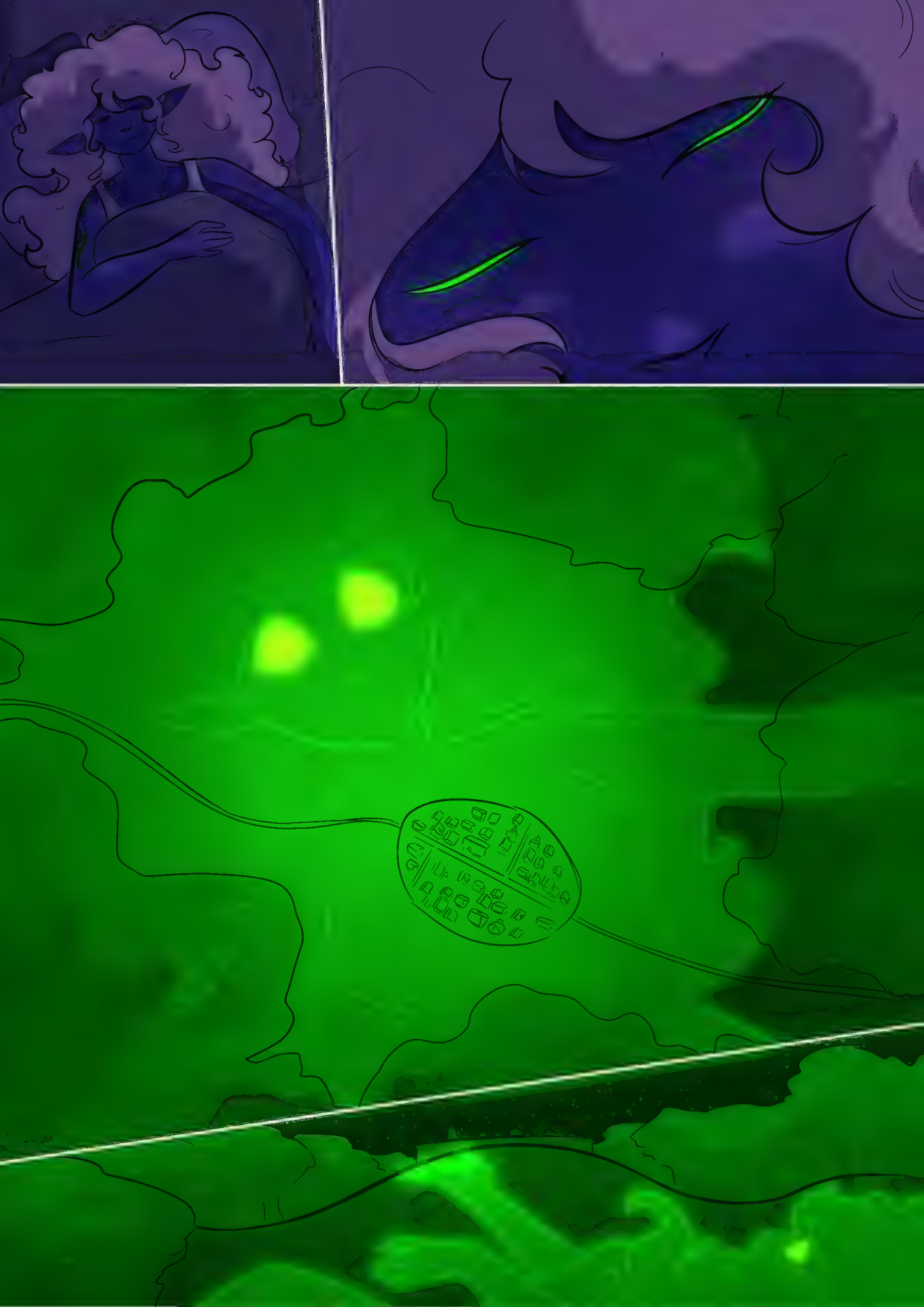
Fine by me. We can dispose of the lacrima when we retrieve my bag.
Which brings me to the most important question -
Do you actually know where he IS?
Er... not precisely.
GREAT.
Guess we're searching the entire forest.
Well, that might not be necessary.
I HAVE been making attempts to find the young man - I was hoping I could talk him down from further mischief.
Obviously, I... have been unsuccessful, but...
While he is very elusive, I found he typically stays close to the river.
Perhaps if you narrow your search to that region, you might find where he's made camp?
Hm. That's still pretty vague, but better than nothing.
Thanks.
We'll start there when we start searching tomorrow.

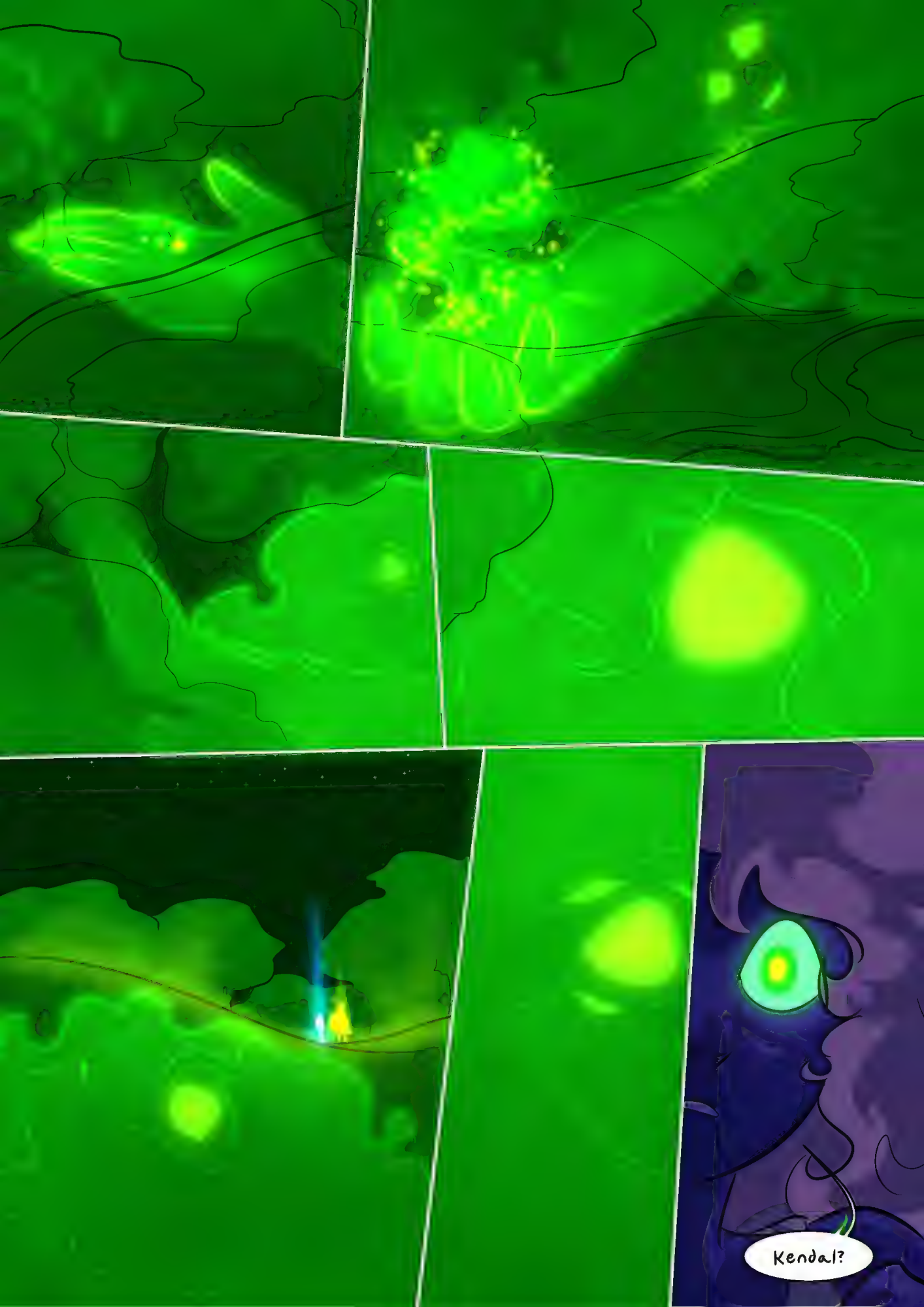
Ugh.
This'll have to do for sleepwear until I can retrieve the rest of my clothes.
Don't worry, all right? We'll stop him.
No-one else is going to get hurt.
I know.


This is a surprise.
Why have you returned?
I need your help.
I found a way to fix your forest without any of our people getting hurt.
You can't tell the mortals in your forest apart, but I think you'll be able to spot this.
Somewhere in your forest, there's a huge chunk of raw, untempered life energy.
It's the source of all your problems.

...Interesting.
I have found it.
Great! Can you tell me where it is?
No.
This is a matter of MY forest.
I shall guide you personally.

Why are you alone, godling?
...Alinva is furious about the chimeras, and Erin is upset his bag was stolen.
Neither of them are thinking straight.
But you hunt the same quarry.
Rage can be quite an asset.
Only if you know who you're fighting.
They want to fight the ferin, but he isn't the problem here.
You suspect another enemy?
No. But the real enemy is the life lacrima he stole.
Without it, he's not actually a threat to the town.
He's not like the Collector. This doesn't have to be a fight.
This time, I can keep everyone safe.




Kendal?

It appears unguarded.
Do you intend to hunt down the thief next?
It might be wise.
Retrieving his stolen power will not prevent him from stealing more.
Maybe not.
It depends on why he stole it.

Regardless of intent, he attacked your people and injured you.
Does that not make him your enemy?
Does it?
Shouldn't you be defending him?
He lives in your forest.
He's one of YOUR people.
Indeed he is. Well done.
...Are you testing me?
To an extent.
Your nature intrigues me.
You defend what is yours, as Yash did, but you seem willing to defend far more.
Your mortals have deemed this thief an enemy.
Yet you disagree.
A god would not act against their own people.
I'm NOT acting against them!
I just don't know how to EXPLAIN this to them!
I'm not their god, and they're not my "people". They're my friends!
Something about this doesn't feel right, but they just think I don't understand what's going on.
They're looking for a fight. I want to keep them safe, but I don't know how to stop them.
So I'll stop the fight before it starts.

Interesting.
If I fix this, maybe we can figure out what's really going on here.
GRAB
You are attached to this body, yes?
It would be unwise to touch that.
It has been partially inscribed with a spell. Your touch could activate it with unknown consequences.
Could you carry it instead?
Even a divine incarnation is a living body.
Were this form to undergo mutation, it could be ripped from my control and run wild.
How dangerous would it be to destroy it?
Deadly, actually!

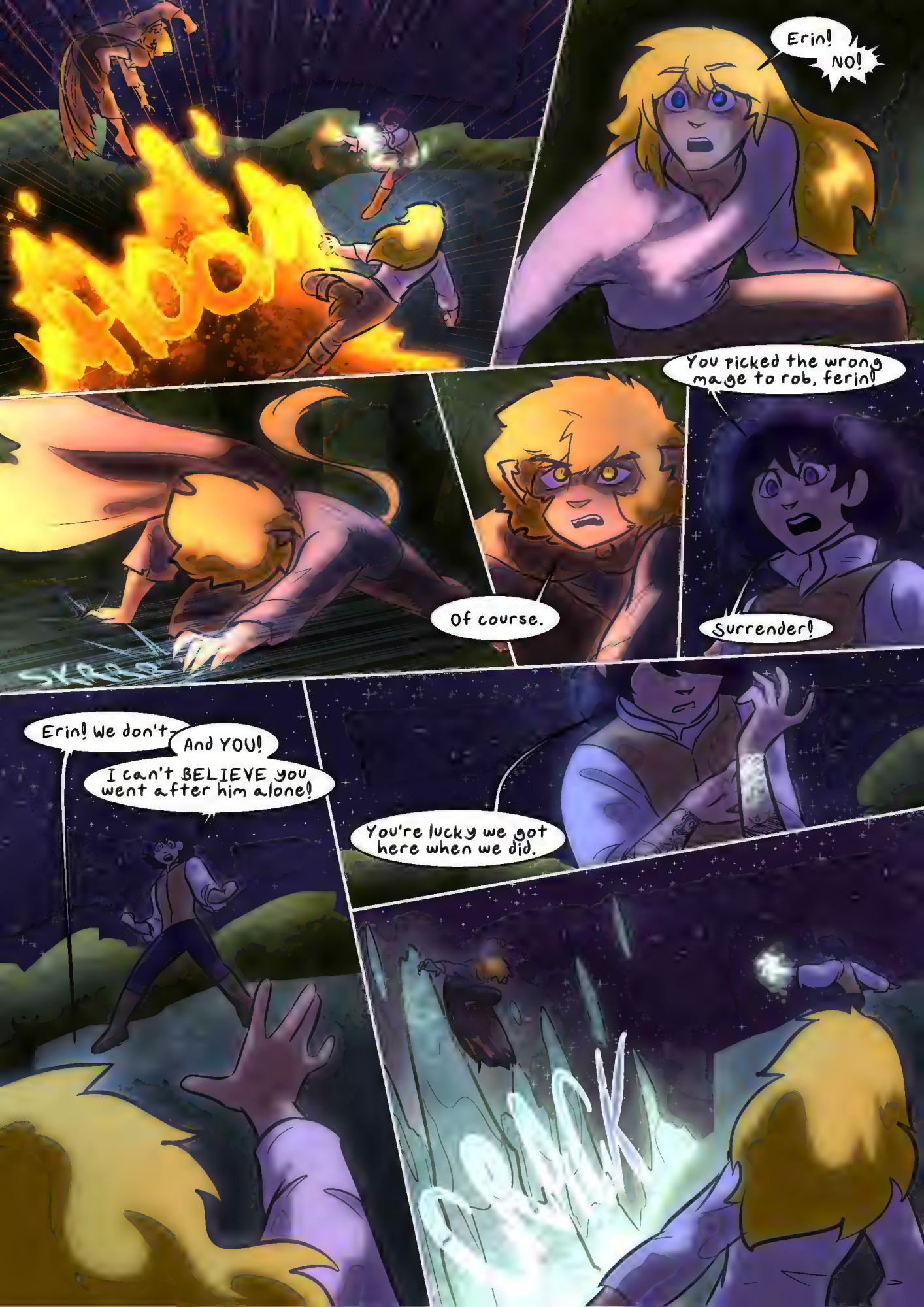
SHINK
SKRRT
Gleicann?
Do as you will, godling.
I am not so protective as Yash.

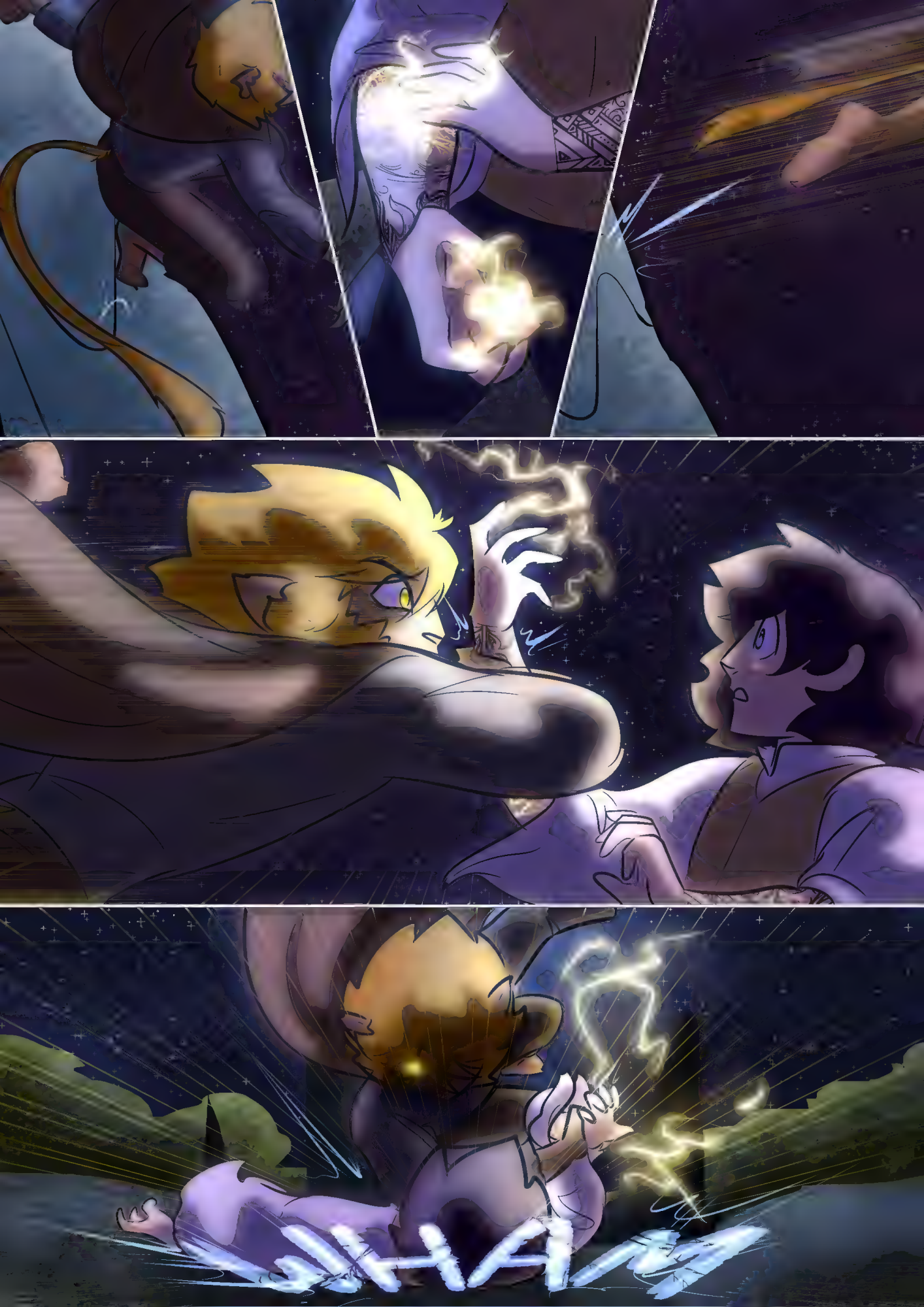
WHAM
No.
But I don't plan on using it.
...So is the sword just for show?

THUMP
I want to try talking first.
Godling.
Vash would be displeased to see his sword so carelessly cast aside.
Ah - sorry.
He would also be displeased to see YOU carelessly damaged
Kindly refrain from dying in my forest.
Anyway-
Wh- ANYWAY?!
What WAS that?
Look, that's not the point.
Where did he GO?!
He's - he's not GONE, exactly, but he's not going to bother us, I think.
...He called you "godling".

You're not human?
...no.
Makes sense.
You don't really move like one.
Don't smell like one, either.
But they don't care, do they?
Because you LOOK like one.
I'll bet they can't even tell.
Mostly.
Must be nice.
No.
Because I'm NOT one of them.
I'm nothing LIKE them.
And most of them don't see that. Not like you do.
They treat me like something I'm not. I don't know how to fix that.
It doesn't feel good to be misinterpreted like that.
It doesn't make me any less alone.

Well, I'm sorry they don't perfectly understand every facet of your personality!
Meanwhile, they hunt ME like an animal because I wasn't cursed to be a perfect human specimen!
I know!
Why do you think I CAME here?
They're so caught up in their assumptions, they can't see either of us for what we really are!
Monsters aren't born. They're not even made.
They create themselves, one atrocity at a time.
And whatever you've done with the lacrima, it's still not that bad. Not yet.
Whatever I've-?
The real problem is the lacrima. If I can get rid of that, there won't have to be a fight.
Well, that's real considerate of you.
But with the crystal, I won't NEED to fight.
So, thanks, but no thanks.
KENDAL!
MOVE!!

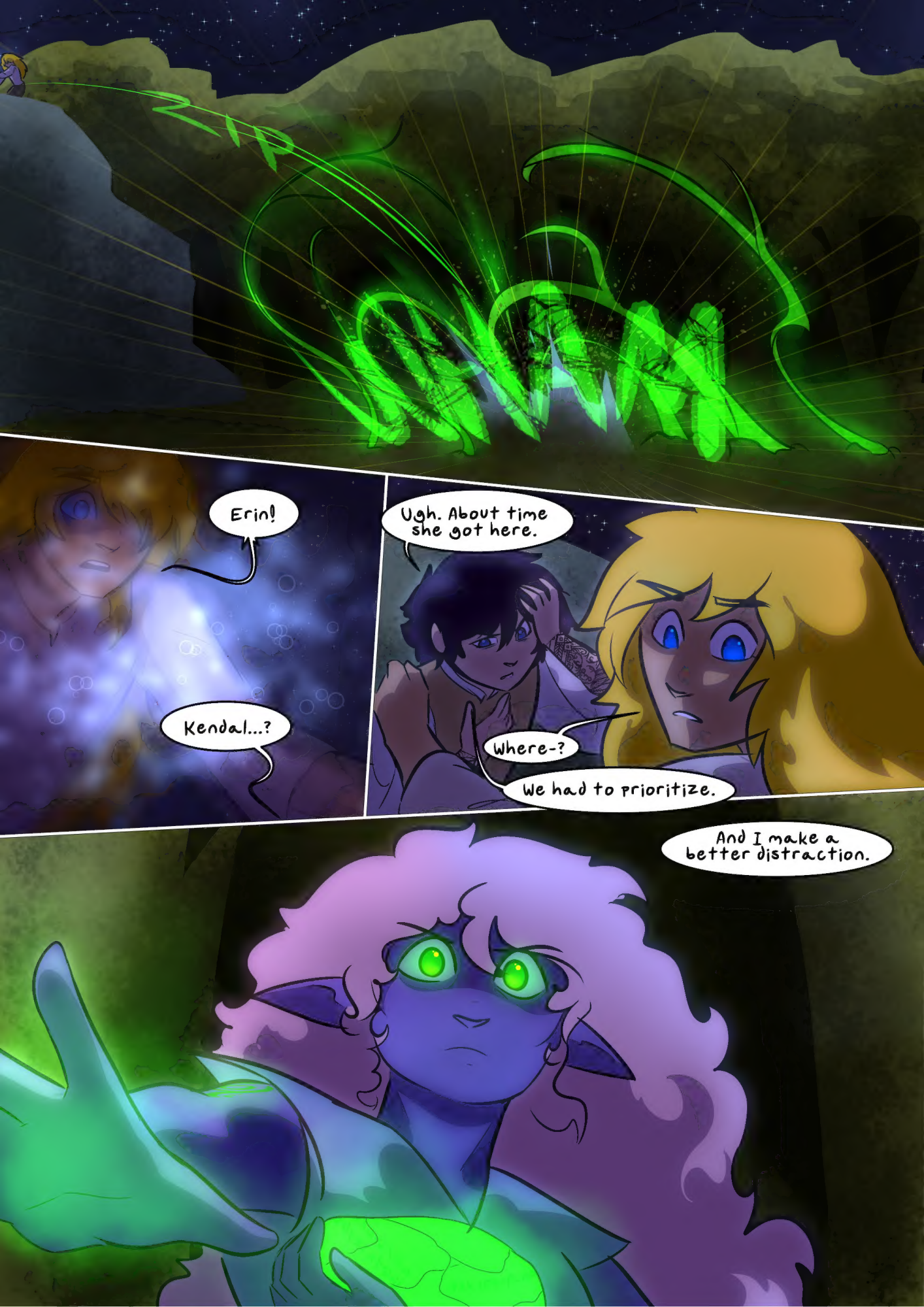

WOOSH
Erin! NO!
You picked the wrong mage to rob, ferin!
Of course.
Surrender!
Erin! We don't-
And YOU!
I can't BELIEVE you went after him alone!
You're lucky we got here when we did.

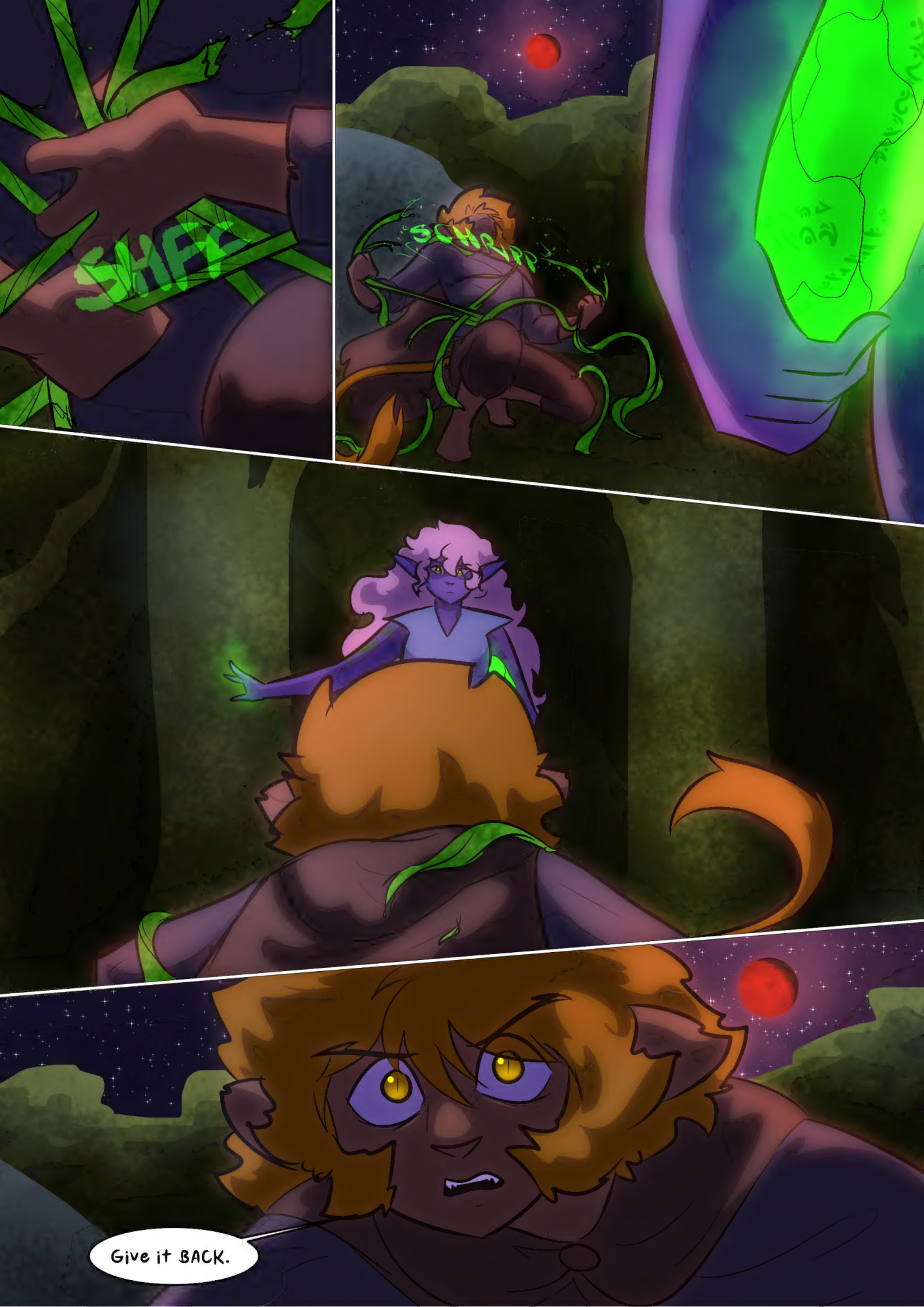

HAA

Arrogant human.
You think you're the first mage to come after me?
ERIN-!
Don't move!
He's fragile.
CRACKLE

Erin!
cough! cough!
KRZZT
CRICK
I think this is yours.

FLASH
AAAH!
Next time, spare yourself the migraine.
And mind your own business?


ZIP
CRACK
Erin!
Kendal...?
Ugh. About time she got here.
Where-?
We had to prioritize.
And I make a better distraction.


SHFF
SCHRVP
Give it BACK.